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What is being assertive?

Standing up for your rights and not being taken advantage of is one definition of being assertive.

It also means communicating what you really want in a clear fashion, respecting your own rights and feelings and the rights and feelings of others.

Assertion is an honest and appropriate expression of one's feelings, opinions, and needs.

It takes self-analysis, and then practice, but the results are worth it.

How is Being Assertive different from Being Aggressive?

Being aggressive means standing up for yourself in ways that violate the rights of others.

Aggressive behavior is typically punishing, hostile, blaming, and demanding. It can involve threats, name-calling, and even actual physical contact. It can also involve sarcasm, catty comments, gossip and "slips of the tongue."

What causes people to avoid being assertive?

Most people are not assertive for fear of displeasing others and of not being liked. However, although you may avoid some immediate unpleasantness by not being assertive, you could also jeopardize the relationship in the long run if you refuse to assert yourself and then feel taken advantage of over and over again.

How Assertive Are You?

Ask yourself the following questions.

- Do you ask for help if you need it?
- Do you express anger and annoyance appropriately?
- Do you ask questions when you're confused?
- Do you volunteer your opinions when you think or feel differently from others?
- Do you speak up in class fairly frequently?
- Are you able to say "no" when you don't want to do something?
- Do you speak with a generally confident manner, communicating caring and strength?
- Do you look at people when you're talking to them?

4 Types of Assertion

1. Basic Assertion

This is a simple, straightforward expression of your beliefs, feelings, or opinions. It's usually a simple "I want" or "I feel" statement.

2. Empathic Assertion

This conveys some sensitivity to the other person. It usually contains two parts- a recognition of the other person's situation or feelings, followed by a statement in which you stand up for your rights.

"I know you've really been busy, but I want to feel that our relationship is important to you. I want you to make time for me and for us."

3. Escalating Assertion

This occurs when the other person fails to respond to your basic assertion and continues to violate your rights. You gradually escalate the assertion and become increasingly firm. It may even include the mention of some type of resulting action on your part, made only after several basic assertive statements. For example, "If you don't complete the work on my car by 5:00 tomorrow, I'll be forced to call the Better Business Bureau."

4. I-Language Assertion

This is especially useful for expressing negative feelings. It involves a 3-part statement:

- **When you do . . . (describe the behavior).**
- **The effects are . . . (describe how the behavior concretely affects you).**
- **I'd prefer. . . (describe what you want).**

The real focus in I-Language Assertion is on the "I feel," "I want" part of the statement. When expressing anger, often the tendency is to blame the other person, fly off the handle and get caught up in the emotion.

I-Language Assertion can help you constructively focus that anger and be clear about your own feelings.

Example: When you didn't buy the groceries like yo said yo would, I couldn't cook the dinner for my parents. I feel hurt and angry with you. Next time, I'd like you to follow through when you agree to do something like. that."

Learn to Be Assertive In a Positive Way

How to begin

Develop a value and belief system which allows you to assert yourself.

This is the hardest part. It means giving yourself permission to be angry, to say "No," to ask for help, to make mistakes.

Learn assertiveness skills.

These include Basic Assertion, Emphathic Assertion, Escalating Assertion and I-Language Assertion (4 Types of Assertion).

Use your best communication skills.

Maintain direct eye contact; keep your posture open and relaxed; be sure your facial expression agrees with the message; keep a level, well-modulated tone of voice; select an appropriate time to be assertive.

Practice, practice, practice!

You won't learn how to become a more assertive person just by reading a pamphlet. If possible, become a part of an assertiveness or communication skills group. (See the back of this brochure for possible sponsors of such groups.)

You can also practice on your friends and family. But tell them what you are doing first! Enlist their help; ask for feedback on how you're doing. In the long run, communicating honestly can help your relationships.

In the beginning, don't try changing your behavior in loaded or difficult situations. Practice first in the least risky ones.

Resources to Consult

Helpful Reading

- *Your Perfect Right: Assertiveness and Equality in your Life and Relationships*, by Robert E. Alberti & Michael Emmons (San Luis Obispo, Impact Publishers, 2001).
- *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*, by Manuel Smith (New York: Bantam Books, 1975)
- *The Assertive Option: Your Rights & Responsibilities*, by Patricia Jakubowski and Arthur J. Lange (Champaign, Ill, Research Press, 1978).
- *Assert Yourself: How to Be Your Own Person*, by Merna Dee Galassi (New York, Human Sciences Press, 1977).
- *How to be an Assertive (Not Aggressive) Woman in Life, in Love, and on the Job*, by Jean Baer (New York, NAL/Dutton, 1991).
- *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*, by Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton (2nd ed., New York, Penguin Books, 1991).

Information on the Internet

Here are two out of the many on-line information sources on assertiveness.

- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: www.couns.uiuc.edu/Brochures/assertiv.htm/.
- State University of New York at Buffalo: <http://ub-counseling.buffalo.edu/assertiveness.shtml/>.

Note: CMHC does not endorse or guarantee any of the information found on these sites.

Campus & Community Resources

for The University of Texas and the Austin Area

- UT Counseling & Mental Health Center: 471-3515 for information on assertion groups or individual counseling.

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To contact the Counseling and Mental Health Center, please call 471-3515.

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